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## VERGIL, AENEID 6. 391 ff

Corpora viva nefas Stygia vectare carina.  
Nec vero Alciden me sum laetatus euntem  
accepisse lacu, nec Thesea Pirithoumque,  
dis quamquam geniti atque invicti viribus essent.  
Tartareum ille manu custodem in vincla petivit  
ipsius a solio regis traxitque trementem;  
hi dominam Ditis thalamo deducere adorti.

The comment of Servius on these words of Charon has profoundly affected the interpretation of the passage, possibly in a way that he did not intend. At any rate the editors seem quite in agreement that, with the words *Nec . . . sum laetatus*, Charon refers to the punishment inflicted upon himself for allowing the heroes named in the text to cross in his skiff. A typical note from a School edition reads as follows: "When Hercules went into the lower world to bring up Cerberus, Charon, being terrified, carried him at once over the Styx, and, as a punishment, was imprisoned a year by the command of Pluto".

But, if the opening line of the passage embodies a binding rule, and Charon is represented as punished because he broke it and transported 'living bodies' in his boat under the pressure of extenuating circumstances (394), it is hard to see why Vergil added the last three lines quoted above. Surely he could assume that his Roman readers would need no instruction as to the errands calling the heroes mentioned to the lower world.

There is a still more serious difficulty in the reply of the Sibyl, 399 ff.:

Nullae hic insidiae tales (absiste moveri),  
nec vim tela ferunt; licet ingens ianitor antro  
aeternum latrans exsanguis terreat umbras,  
casta licet patruī servet Proserpina limen.  
Troius Aeneas, pietate insignis et armis,  
ad genitorem imas Erebi descendit ad umbras.  
Si te nulla movet tantae pietatis imago,  
at ramum hunc (aperit ramum, qui veste latebat)  
adgnoscas.

The Sibyl, of course, is expert on all matters pertaining to the lower world. Yet she urges the admission of Aeneas on the basis of his peaceful errand, and puts forward his *pietas* as a sufficient ground for allowing him to enter the skiff, holding back the golden bough as a final argument, if the other fails. Vergil would hardly represent her as making such a proposal, if he had meant to imply in the earlier passage that the mere fact of transporting 'living bodies' was an infraction of law rendering Charon liable to punishment.

Looking backward, then, it becomes clear that if, with the words *Nec . . . sum laetatus*, Charon is represented as referring to his own punishment,

Vergil means to say there that Charon was allowed some discretion in the matter of carrying over 'living bodies', and that he incurred a penalty for admitting persons who so shamefully abused the privilege.

Looked at from this angle, the insertion of the lines regarding the motives of the heroes in visiting the lower world is fully justified. But if this is the correct interpretation of the passage as a whole, Vergil has not expressed himself with his usual clearness. And Charon is made to appear as suffering for what in the main is the wrongdoing of others.

The question is raised, therefore, whether it is necessary to suppose that Vergil had in mind at all the punishment of Charon when he wrote this passage. The words *Nec . . . sum laetatus* surely could bear a different interpretation, and one that fits far better in the context in which they stand.

For, though a link between two worlds, Charon distinctly belongs to the nether realm, and he identifies himself throughout with its interests; thus he says *nostra ad flumina* (388), and at 397 he speaks of '(our) queen'. Why then should he not 'deeply regret' directly on his own account that it was through his agency that Hercules and others found entrance, only to heap indignity and insult upon the dignitaries of the region? This is the simple and natural meaning of *Nec . . . sum laetatus*; and, on the basis of that interpretation the thought of the whole passage is briefly as follows:

*Charon*.—"Stop where you are. It is against the rules to carry over living bodies. Even though they came with good credentials and threatened force, I subsequently had occasion to regret deeply making an exception in favor of Hercules, Theseus, and Pirithous, for the one dragged Cerberus away from the very throne of the king, and the others offered violence to our queen".

*Sibyl*.—"No such designs are harbored here, and no attempt will be made to use force. There is no thought of molesting the dignitaries of the realm. Trojan Aeneas, a righteous man, desires merely to interview his father. Such *pietas* might well justify you in making an exception in his favor; but, if that is not enough, here is the golden branch".

On this basis, everything fits perfectly, even to the final detail, wherein is described the effect of the sight of the golden branch upon Charon, namely: *Tumida ex ira tum corda residunt*. Up to that point he has been bristling like a watchdog, jealous lest any other marauder force a passage of the river. His suspicion and his resentment subside at the sight of the mystic token.

The bit of lore in regard to Charon's punishment which is unearthed by Servius and incorporated in his commentary is interesting enough. But the fact that there was such a tradition does not prove that this item was prominent in Vergil's mind when he wrote *Nec . . . sum laetatus*; and still less may we be sure that this part of the story was so well known that the Roman reader would instinctively make the connection. It is much more probable that he would understand the passage as above explained.

Hence, quite apart from its failure to square with the suggestions of the Sibyl recorded in 399 ff., those who maintain the view that verse 392 refers to a punishment meted out to Charon for breaking the regulation forbidding the transportation of 'living bodies' will have to explain why Vergil uses so vague a phrase as *Nec . . . sum laetatus* for a point that needs emphasis if the average reader is to follow the meaning, and then devotes three lines to details that are familiar to everyone, and which (under this interpretation) may fairly be called otiose.

Some may prefer to take the middle ground noted above, holding that Charon was punished because the persons he admitted abused the privilege. But, in addition to the objections which are entered against that interpretation, it is perhaps fair to point out that in general we are not justified in reading into the mind of an author every bit of erudition that some commentator happens to attach to a given text. The text indeed may prove an apt peg on which to hang the comment; but we should not allow the latter to deflect us from the course of the author's own thought. That Servius here has misled many seems obvious.

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### 'BRIEFLY SPEAKING' IN VERGIL

Commentators on Vergil rarely seem to think it worth while to note his curious use of *breviter* and *pauca* (*paucis*) with words of saying. Conington, on Aeneid 4. 333, attempts to explain how it is that a speech twenty-eight lines in length is called *pauca*. In Aeneid 6. 538, when the Sibyl has for the third time spoken *breviter*, he simply remarks that Vergil is "fond of adverting to the brevity of the Sibyl's speeches". He might have added that Vergil as a rule is fond of alluding to the brevity of speeches, often where the term does not seem truly descriptive. In the Aeneid, *breviter* occurs nine times, *pauca* (*paucis*) occurs twelve times in connection with speeches. The shortest of these speeches begins with 9. 355, and is but two lines in length. The urgency of the situation is responsible for the brevity, nam lux inimica propinquat. Dido's haste to cut off her life as soon as possible, 4.631, supplies another urgent situation, though her speech, which she gave *breviter*, consists of seven lines. Perhaps in no other of the twenty-one cases is there any special need of haste, so that the reason for the use of the term

*breviter* or *pauca* (*paucis*) must be sought aside from the urgency.

The idea of comparison will explain some of these cases. This is clearly shown in 9.16, where the term *paucis* is applied to Jupiter's speech, which precedes, of ten lines, while Venus's speech, which follows, of forty-five lines, is characterized as *non pauca*. Probably the poet intended thus to contrast the decision of Jupiter's words with Venus's helpless rage. Jupiter's speech of six lines, 10. 622-627, following Juno's of fourteen, may be similarly explained. Perhaps also Dido's speech of seventeen lines, 1.562-578, is to be considered brief in comparison with that of Ilioneus, of thirty-seven lines, which it follows.

But such comparison will not account for Aeneas's 'brief' speech of twenty-nine lines, 4. 333-361, following Dido's speech of twenty-six; nor for the Sibyl's speech of nine lines, 6. 322-330, in answer to Aeneas's question of but three lines; nor for her speech of eight lines, 6.399-407, in reply to Charon's speech of ten lines; nor for several other similar cases. Comparison may be involved, but it is differently turned. It is comparison with what *might* be said. Thus, in 3.377 Helenus indicates that he will tell *pauca e multis*, prohibit nam cetera Parcae scire Helenum farique vetat Saturnia Iuno. The 'few things' make a speech of eighty-two lines, which we are led to believe is small in comparison with what might have been told, if Juno and the Fates had been willing. In like manner, the story of Troy's last agony fills an entire book, but it is brief in comparison with all that might be told. This is clearly the implication of 2.11. Such is the inference to be drawn from Dido's 'brief' speech, 4.634-640, for we are told in 630 that she had turned her mind on every consideration: partis animum versabat in omnis.

We get some light on the poet's attitude by observing his references to 'long' speeches. Perhaps none is quoted directly excepting those of Venus, referred to above, 10.18-62, and of Iarbas, 4.202-218. The last, consisting of thirteen lines, is characterized by *multa*, but it is really shorter than some of those described by *pauca*. Both cases involve a reference to the content of the speech. Venus's helpless rage and Iarbas's foolish raving appear long without regard to the actual number of lines. *Multa* goes with wild and unrestrained speaking. Compare 11.471, 12.601. The brief speech is apt to represent composure. And, even when the speech occupies an entire book, the self-control of the speaker suggests that the part told is brief in comparison with all he has suffered.

Another indirect light may be had by a reference to the poet's expression of thinking. We frequently find phrases like *plurima volvens, multa putans, multa movens* used with Vergil's subjects. Aeneas considers every detail, 4.286: in partisque rapit varias perque omnia versat. He presses grief deep in his heart, 1.209: premit altum corde dolorem. Jupiter turns over his cares in his heart, 1.227: illum talis iactantem pectore curas.